



Tom Wallace, Star Tribune

Jim Cummings, who closed Cummings Books in Dinkytown last month, says with a gentle sarcasm that "books are a little passé, I suppose." He was able to sell his inventory to one buyer.

With the economy, it's been a double whammy for four independents set to close.

By **KIM ODE**, Star Tribune

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In a shakeout inducing shivers to rival a suspense novel, one local independent bookseller after another is closing up shop.

No more Biermaier's Books in Minneapolis, for 60

years among the largest used bookstores in Minnesota. No more J. O'Donoghue Books in Anoka, serving the north metro for four decades. No more Northern Lights Books & Gifts in Duluth, calling it quits after 17 years. And no more Cummings Books in Dinkytown, which papered over its windows last month.

Others such as the Bookcase of Wayzata -- the oldest independent bookseller in the Twin Cities with roots in the 1950s -- are hanging on by their book jackets as e-books gain popularity in the booming online market. "We have lost a lot of regular customers to the e-book revolution," said owner Charlie Leonard.

Booksellers are calling the shift a "Gutenberg moment" for the entire publishing industry, likening it to Johannes Gutenberg's game-changing invention of movable type almost 600 years ago.

E-books aren't the only adversary, of course; people are buying fewer books in general. Still, dusting bookshelves in the digital age is starting to feel a bit quaint.

"Unfortunately, the publishers don't understand the ramifications to brick-and-mortar stores" of the growth in electronic readers such as Kindles, Nooks and iPads, said Anita Zager of Northern Lights Books.

Lately, she said, more customers are browsing to decide which books to download at home. "We're really now a showroom for books."

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The number of independent bookstores has been declining for some time, from about 6,000 in the early 1990s to about 2,200 today, according to the American Booksellers Association. Sales of all books are declining, down almost 8 percent in September, which followed a 6.5 percent drop in August.

Books, in this context, mean things with pages and bindings. For digital sales, the publishing industry relies on projections. Earlier this year, Bloomberg Businessweek reported that digital book sales in the U.S. would rise 5.8 percent through 2015.

Projections, of course, rely on people buying electronic readers such as the Kindle, which Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos famously called his response to "the failings of a physical book."

Here comes Google

Jim Cummings tends to sigh at such notions, remarking with a gentle sarcasm that "books are a little passé, I suppose." Still, he said, watching a customer leave Cummings Books with an armload of titles, "I doubt the fellow came in looking for all those Dylan books that he found. The beauty of a store like this is that you can browse."

For 14 years, his store was a Dinkytown fixture, sharing a wall with Al's Breakfast. It had the particular papery scent of a used bookstore, especially one with books old enough to have leather covers, where the aisles smell a little musty and the sight of a cat or two does not surprise.

The tough economy hit used bookstores from a

slightly different angle. Inventories got a boost as people sold their own books to eke out extra income, but that also meant there were fewer buyers. Online booksellers from Amazon to Alibris now also sell used books.

"I used to have Boy Scouts who would go to garage sales and buy a book for 50 cents and sell it to me for \$2," Cummings said. "They don't need me anymore. They can do it themselves" online.

Then there is the Google Books Project that scans books and directs them to online purchasing sites. "I get a book that I think will be in demand, and Google is taking photos of it page by page," Cummings said.

Last week, Google eBooks launched its long-awaited (or feared) electronic bookstore. It immediately became the largest e-book provider in the world, according to Publishers Weekly, with almost 3 million books, including more than 2 million titles available for free.

The program offers options for independent booksellers to sell Google's books on their websites without having to invest in expensive software platforms. While too late for the indie shops here that are closing, the president of the ABA, Michael Tucker, told the San Francisco Chronicle that the program puts indies "on a level playing field" with online booksellers.

"We're not going to make a living from e-books," Tucker said. "But at least we can offer e-books to customers who want them, rather than having them

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Audiences for authors

For all the talk of bricks-and-mortar, bookstores also are about flesh-and-blood, specifically in their hosting of author events. Duluth's Zager said the pleasure has been hers. "The authors from this area, it's been such a privilege to see their careers take off."

Minneapolis author Lorna Landvik traces the roots of her success to the indie bookstores who championed her debut novel, "Patty Jane's House of Curl," in 1999.

"I really learned the power of independent booksellers and hand-selling," said Landvik. Their demise "is like the gentrification of the country, and not in a good way."

Last month, Leonard swallowed hard and posted a heartfelt plea on his bookstore's website, asking people to "think of what you can do as an individual customer. We need you in order to survive. We need you to shop here."

The Bookcase is known for maintaining a full calendar of visiting authors, giving many newcomers an opportunity to build an audience. It's an effort rooted in Leonard's concern about how a culture may be affected if readership is "defined by top 100 lists."

"A painful thing is the way books are becoming a loss

leader at places like Costco and Sam's Club," he said. Cost aside, "your ability as a reader to have options is very, very limited. Can you find 'The Great Gatsby' at Costco?"

At J. O'Donoghue Books in Anoka, Sorenson and her partner, John Campisi, always have had to work other full-time jobs in addition to owning the bookstore. "I can sell paperbacks all day and not be able to keep my lights on," Sorenson said. "We're being decimated, no doubt about it."

Their bookstore is slated to close in February unless they can find a buyer. Right now, they're concentrating on selling enough books at deep discounts to pay back rent and other expenses. "We want to make sure we can walk away from the deal without having screwed anyone over," she said.

Cummings was in the midst of his going-out-of-business sale when someone came in and bought his entire inventory. The new owner, whom he would not disclose, will warehouse the books and presumably sell them online. Duluth's Northern Lights Books will close when Zager's lease is up at the end of February. Biermaier's Books will close at year's end, the result more of Bill Biermaier's decision to retire than of industry challenges, although he said the current climate helped drive the decision.

At the Bookcase of Wayzata, Leonard's situation is complicated by a reconstruction project that has been plagued by delays. While work is progressing, his customers will face torn-up streets for months

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to come, which prompted him to post his plea for business.

"We know we're heading into a worse summer," he said. "It's all positive on the other end, because it will lead to development. But I just hope we can hang on."

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